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Toward a Critical Historiography of Islamic Architecture

Nasser Rabbat

1 Long burdened by the biases of its Eurocentric pedigree, Islamic architectural history only recently began to reconsider some of its most entrenched assumptions, such as linear progression, religious self-identification, and cultural autonomy.[1] Culture, in its flatulent claim as a framer of identity, is beginning to lose its primacy as the defining factor for areas of specialization within the field of architectural history.[2] New methods are being devised to account for the fluidity with which ideas, techniques, as well as people and material seem to have crossed all kinds of boundaries throughout history to create what is basically a multicultural architecture, or better still, architecture *tout court*.

2 Earlier generations of Islamic architectural historians were ultra-respectful of disciplinary, cultural, and historical boundaries.[3] They followed a linear chronology that began with the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina around 620 CE, run parallel to the evolving Western architecture for a few centuries, and fizzled out with the dawn of the colonial age. They were intensely preoccupied with the analytically rigid categories of origin, precedent, and formal analogy. These concerns tinged their work with a patina of cosmocentricity and historical determinism. In this, however, they were not alone. Like their counterparts specializing in the architecture of other non-Western cultures (such a vapid term), they subscribed too uncritically to the canonical view of world architecture as a culturally stratified structure with Western architecture at its core. Despite their erudite and prodigious output, they were neither equipped to nor interested in studying the heterogeneous genealogies and hybrid qualities of any architecture, past and present. Instead, they set the stage for self-contained architectural discourses, reducing their culture' architecture to an endogenous and seemingly insular tradition.

3 That trajectory was academically and disciplinarily formalized when Islamic architecture became a subject of study within art history.[4] This happened slowly in the early twentieth century with the establishment of the first academic chairs for the

study of Islamic art history, which included architectural history, in top art history departments in major Western universities. With this development, the study of Islamic art and architecture became a first in a constellation of culture-specific, non-Western traditions, like Chinese, Indian, and Mesoamerican art and architecture, to make their way into Western academe. But lacking theoretical positions of their own devise, these disciplinary newcomers found themselves subsumed by the conceptual framework of Western art and architectural history.[5] This was methodologically beneficial and academically prestigious to be sure, for Western art history had a dignified scholarly tradition behind it and had substantially matured through its intellectual encounters with various historiographical and anthropological new schools of thought in the twentieth century.

4 But Western art history also engendered a hegemonic structure in the Foucauldian sense; that is, it discursively controlled the intricate network of epistemological and cultural conventions that produced and used art and architectural historical knowledge. Furthermore, because of its venerable legacy and institutional power, the chronology of Western art, from its presumed Classical origins to its triumphant culmination in modern times, constituted the historical core of the field and relegated other areas of study to peripheral places in its ordered hierarchy. This is best exemplified by the famous Tree of Architecture of Banister Fletcher, which appeared as frontispiece in all the editions of his book, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method for the Student, Craftsman, and Amateur,* between 1896 and 1961. This unabashedly racist diagram reserved the trunk and the upper, healthy branches of the tree to an uninterrupted succession of Western styles from Greece to modern America, and relegated the architecture of all other cultures to dead-end branches.[6] This pattern, which was historically very problematic on its own, had an indelible effect on the conceptualization of all non-Western architecture. In the case of Islamic architecture, it privileged a set of static characterizations—sensual and ornamental being the favorite among them—that stood in stark contrast to the historically dynamic attributes frequently portrayed as specific to Western architecture. Instances that did not fit into this division, such as the shared classical architectural heritage in medieval Europe and the Islamic Middle East, the fruitful interaction between them during the Crusades, and their similar historicizing stances in the eighteenth century, were explained away as oddities provoked by exceptional historical circumstances.[7]

5 This prejudiced dichotomy, which depended on ideological and imperial postures more than historical facts or intellectual reflections, affected the scholarship of nationalist architectural historians in the sometimes hastily formed states of the formerly colonized world. In their zeal to purge their emerging national identity from any potentially damning colonial influence, these scholars bought into the clean slate and separate trajectories stipulations the model promulgated, so as to reconstruct a “pure” and “authentic” cultural and architectural heritage. As noted by Frantz Fanon in the 1960s, the nationalists’ heartfelt resistance to the hegemonic Western intellectual construct, which they had all absorbed during their university education, did not prevent their falling into the trap of its conceptual premises. They ended up structuring and categorizing the history of “their” architecture, and of “their” culture in general, from an exclusive and ultimately narrowly defined national, religious, or cultural perspective.[8]

6 The publication of Edward Said's seminal book *Orientalism* in 1978 marked a turning point in the study of Islamic architecture, as in many other marginalized fields. Empowered by critical and postcolonial theories, young Islamic architectural historians began soon after to seriously challenge the limitations of their politically tainted scholarly lineage and to boldly extend their domain of inquiry into hitherto neglected periods, areas, and points of creative convergence.[9] Some focused on the intercultural development of Islamic architecture with its substantial connections to the Late Antique Mediterranean, Iranian, and Hindu-Buddhist cultures in the early periods and the Asian, African, and European cultures in medieval and more recent times. Others decided to dip into the intracultural spaces—that is zones within any given society at a given time that are shared by its diverse constituent groups— where peoples have always met and exchanged ideas, views, beliefs, and practices, and, in the process, produced art and architecture. Thus, the contributions of the various Islamic fringe sects and esoteric religious orders, Christian and Jewish denominations, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Hindus, and others have started to be analyzed as both instrumental components of a shared architectural language and as distinct expressions within its fold.[10]

7 Several critical research programs can be singled out as promising venues in the field's current quest for epistemological and methodological integrity. The most pressing in my opinion is the elaboration of a dynamic and adaptive historical framework that depends neither on borrowed models nor on proscribed political or cultural boundaries. To piggyback on other historical frameworks and other periodizations, as has been the case, has clearly distorted the understanding of Islamic architecture for much too long. For instance, classifying Islamic architecture along the dynastic sequence of Islamic political history, i.e., to speak of Abbasid or Mamluk architecture, has led to the disregard of the architecture's autonomous evolution and continuity, for artistic and architectural movements rarely correspond to political shifts. Dynastic periodization has also resulted in needlessly privileging the role of the royal patrons in the conception of architecture and its signification to the detriment of other involved parties, such as the designers and builders or the end users. In the same way, categorizing Islamic architecture after the Western stylistic sequence —i.e., Classical, Medieval, or Baroque— has subjected the development of Islamic architecture to the rhythm of another architectural tradition, despite the fact that the two traditions intermittently shared the same trajectory. It also meant that some attributes of Islamic architecture have been glossed over when they were named after formally or conceptually comparable characteristics of Western architecture, Baroque Ottoman being the most conspicuous, even though the similarity was mostly skin deep and historically unsubstantiated.

8 This terminological confusion has pervaded the study of Islamic architecture to the point that any serious revision of the methods and conceptual contours of the field will have to depend on a critical analysis of chronological division and historical parallels. As any cursory historical investigation will demonstrate, other decisive forces—such as massive population movements, lingering religious, national, and tribal pride, theological and spiritual breakthroughs, not to speak of artistic, structural, and technological commonalties and innovations—had a more profound effect on architecture in Islamic history than mere dynastic change. But this does not mean that dynastic nomenclature has to be totally thrown out. A flexible and multi-referential

periodization, with chronologically and geographically open-ended boundaries that account for the stylistic, dynastic, and sociocultural overlaps, would provide the most adequate historical setting for the study of Islamic architecture. Such a malleable temporal framework would accommodate new discoveries and changes of perception and conception without loosing its operational integrity.

9 A second topic that needs to be more forcefully pursued by the new historians is what can be called the multicultural quality of Islamic architecture, a quality shared by all architectural traditions with a living history. No single model—or unique cultural reference for that matter—can be enlisted as the sole inspiration behind any of the famous examples of Islamic architecture. Different tensions were at work. The people and groups concerned, whether Muslims or non-Muslims living and working in Islamic states, seem to have adopted, borrowed, resurrected, modified, and invented at every stage, and then reapplied the new creative process with the next work. The buildings they constructed reflected these choices in the mixed provenance of their forms, spaces, and techniques, but they also exhibited a relative stability of their functions, intentions, and goals. They referred to heterogeneous cultures, traditions, ideals, and images that their patrons, designers, and builders considered suitable, representative, or desirable for themselves and their communities.

10 The multicultural quality, however, goes beyond coloring our perception of Islamic architecture to conditioning the means by which we can analyze it. Thus, not only were divergences from a putative norm common, but the very idea of an overarching conformism or an underlying essentialism do not seem to provide an adequate explanation for any of the bold and innovative buildings dotting the historical landscape across the Islamic world. New research methods will have to be designed to comprehend and structure the diverse alignments that asserted and reasserted themselves in diverse and flexible combinations within the domain of Islamic architecture throughout its long history. Some experiments seem to have led nowhere and were dropped either immediately of after a few trials. Others were felt to be more satisfactory and were adopted for longer stretches of time. Still others became cultural standards and were used over and over again, some of them even surviving the "pre-modern" periods to become iconic markers in the revival of "Islamic architecture" as a design category pursued by many practitioners today. The cases of the arch and dome as carriers of cultural meanings are such examples. Not only did they complete the transition into modern times with hardly a change in their significance, but their use has expanded to permeate all religious structures everywhere Muslims build monuments to their faith.

11 A third critical issue, and one closely connected to the second, is the dialogic nature of the multiculturalist quality discernible in Islamic architecture. In many of its celebrated examples, this architecture appears to have been guided by a purposeful intellectual and aesthetic exchange within its own multicultural environment or with past and contemporary cultures near and far. Thus, Islamic architecture had interlocutors in Late Antique, Persian, South Arabian, Syriac, Coptic, Visigothic, Byzantine, Armenian, Soghdian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Malay architectural traditions in its formative period, and recently Eclectic, revival, Art-Deco, and even Modern, and Post-Modern ones. But rather than mimetic, the process was dialogic, that is, it consciously engaged other architectural traditions in a vibrant interchange that affected all sides'output not only in subtle nods to each other's styles but also in clear

references to each other's most significant or sacred forms and concepts. This is evidently the case in all Umayyad structures known to us today. But it is also clearly apparent in a vast array of other examples where the cultural dialogue visibly modified the formal outcome. The effects of this dialogic exchange on the other cultural interlocutors were as pervasive as they were on Islamic architecture despite the dominant art historical framework that tends to discourage any serious investigation into the scope and significance of such exchanges. Scholars working on Byzantine, medieval European, Eastern Christian, and Hindu architectural traditions are coming up with various instances of direct and evidently conscious and intentional adaptations from Islamic architectural sources and vice versa.

12 These critical and revisionist inquiries are bound to release Islamic architecture from its historical cocoon and to set it well on its way to finally devise its own epistemological and methodological contours as an active and integral component of world architecture. The success of this process will depend not only on how Islamic architectural historians will resolve the paradoxes within their own subfield, but also, and perhaps to an even larger extent, on how Western architectural historians, in their capacity as prime arbiters of the discipline, will receive their newly assertive interlocutors.

NOTES DE FIN

1. For an interesting review of the field's pedigree, see J. M. ROGERS, *From Antiquarianism to Islamic Archaeology*, Cairo, Quaderni Dell' Instituto Italiano di Cultura per la R.A.E., 1974.

2. See James CLIFFORD, "On Ethnographic Authority," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 21–54. For a succinct discussion on the role of culture in the study of architecture, see Samer AKKACH, "The Burden of Difference: Rethinking the Role of Culture in Architectural Education," *Architectural Theory Review* 5:1 (April 2000), pp. 61–64.

3. Three recent surveys of the field still show traces of this delimitation, see Stephen VERNOIT, "Islamic Art and Architecture: An Overview of Scholarship and Collecting, c. 1850–c. 1950," in VERNOIT, ed., *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections 1850–1950*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2000, pp. 1-61; Sheila S. BLAIR and Jonathan M. BLOOM, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field," *The Art Bulletin* 85, 1 (March 2003), pp. 152–84; Robert HILLENBRAND, "Studying Islamic Architecture: Challenges and Perspectives." *Architectural History* 46 (2003): 1–18

4. See the discussion of Zeynep CELIK, "Colonialism, Orientalism, and the Canon," *The Art Bulletin* 78, 2 (June 1996), pp 202–205; for one specific aspect see my, "Writing the History of Islamic Architecture of Cairo," *Design Book Review* 31 (Winter 1994), pp. 48–51.

5. See the discussion of the specific case of Ottoman architecture in Gulsum Baydar NALBANTOGLU, "The Birth of An Aesthetic Discourse in Ottoman Architecture," *METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture* 8, 2 (1988), pp. 115-122.
6. See Gülsüm Baydar NALBANTOGLU, "Beyond Lack and Excess: Other Architectures Other Landscapes" *Journal of Architectural Education* 54, 1 (September 2000), pp. 20–27.
7. Garth FOWDEN, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* Princeton, 1993, p. 9, picked up on the same point by asserting that "There are roads out of antiquity that do not lead to the Renaissance." His book offers a historical reconceptualization of the antiquity to Islam continuum that challenges previous frameworks.
8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. Constance Farrington, New York, Grove Press, 1963, "On National Culture,"pp. 167–99.
9. A recent example is the special issue of the journal *RES,* vol. 43 (Spring 2003), subtitled *Islamic Arts* (in the plural) and edited by Oleg Grabar with fourteen contributions dealing with various topics related to Islamic art from late antiquity to the present.
10. See for instance: R. A. JAIRAZBHOY, "The Taj Mahal in the Context of East and West: Study in the Comparative Method," *Journal of the Warburg Courtauld Institute* 24 (1961), pp. 59–88; Gulru NECIPOGLU, "Suleyman the Magnificent and the representation of power in the context of Ottoman-Hapsburg-papal rivalry," *Art bulletin* 71, 3 (Sept, 1989), pp. 401–427; Cynthia Robinson, "*Mudéjar* revisited: A prolegomena to the reconstruction of perception, devotion and experience at the *Mudéjar* convent of Clarisas, Tordesillas, Spain (14th Century A.D.)" *RES* 43 (Spring 2003), pp. 51–77; and my "The Dialogic Dimension in Umayyad Art," *RES* 43 (Spring 2003), pp. 78–94.

RÉSUMÉS

This paper explores what I propose to term the multicultural model for the study of Islamic architecture. In trying to elucidate this model, I will revisit the traditional definitions of Islamic architecture, which has rarely been examined without proscribed historical or ideological limits. This is especially true in the case of its presumed temporal boundaries: the polemical discontinuity from late antique to Islamic architecture, and the forced rupture between modern architecture in the Islamic world and its historical genealogy. I will propose a dynamic and multi-referential historical framework, with chronologically open-ended boundaries that accommodate the stylistic, dynastic, and sociocultural overlaps and emphasize the cultural diversity within the Islamic context, which produced the various architectural traditions that dot the historical and geographic map of the Islamic world.

INDEX

Mots-clés : historiographie, eurocentrisme, architecture islamique, périodisation
Index géographique : Maghreb